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AUTHOR	Kutner, Mark
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ABSTRACT

Preparation of instructors is considered to be one of the greatest needs in adult basic education (ABE) and English-as-a-Second Language (ESL) programs. Many ABE and ESL teachers and volunteer instructors receive little or no training, either in subject matter content or in the process of teaching English to adults. The challenge for the adult education field is to design an effective system of staff development within the constraints of the ABE and ESL delivery system. These constraints include limited financial resources for programs, the part-time nature of instruction for adults, high instructor turnover, few state training requirements for ABE and ESL instructors, and lack of a unified adult education research base. This digest summarizes research on the formats of staff development for ABE and ESL teachers and volunteer instructors and identifies key elements of effective staff development programs. (VWL)

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Staff Development for ABE and ESL Teachers and Volunteers

by Mark Kutner
Pelavin Associates, Inc.

Preparation of instructors is considered to be one of the greatest needs in adult basic education (ABE) and English as a second language (ESL) programs (Foster, 1988; Kazemek, 1988). Many ABE and ESL teachers and volunteer instructors receive little or no training, either in subject matter content or in the process of teaching English to adults. The challenge for the adult education field is to design an effective system of staff development within the constraints of the ABE and ESL delivery system. These constraints include limited financial resources for programs, the part-time nature of instruction for adults, high instructor turnover, few state training requirements for ABE and ESL instructors, and lack of a unified adult education research base (Tibbetts, Kutner, Hemphill, & Jones, 1991). This digest summarizes research on the formats of staff development for ABE and ESL teachers and volunteer instructors and identifies key elements of effective staff development programs.

Staff Development Formats

Because of the lack of state certification requirements and the lack of training opportunities in institutions of higher education, most adult education staff development takes place through voluntary inservice offerings (e.g., workshops, conferences, seminars) rather than in preservice training (Tibbetts et al., 1991). The following types of inservice staff development formats have emerged: *Single workshops*—usually one session focused on a specific topic without follow-up; *Conferences*—a day or two of workshops and plenary sessions on various topics; *Workshop series*—a sequenced group of training sessions, each session drawing upon prior training; *Summer institutes*—generally full-day training over a period of time during the summer followed up by one or more workshops during the year; *University coursework*—a weekly or monthly class; *Peer coaching*—teachers teaching teachers; *Action research*—teachers as researchers identify questions that interest them and conduct systematic inquiry in their own teaching environments as they work with their students; and *Self-directed learning*—the adult education teacher or volunteer instructor determines the areas in which he or she would like to receive training and how to go about getting that training. Self-directed learning can include teacher-sharing groups, study circles, and minigrants to instructors to do their own reading or research.

Key Elements of Effective Staff Development

Given the lack of empirical data with which to document effective staff development practices, in 1991 the U.S. Department of Education funded the *Study of ABE/ESL Instructor Training Approaches*. The study identified a number of key elements of effective staff development through a review of the research literature and site visits to nine staff development programs. The programs selected for the study were nominated by leaders in the field and represented ABE and ESL training programs, training for both new and experienced teachers and volunteer instructors, and locally and state-focused services. The key elements of effective staff development identified in the study were organized into three broad categories: developing ownership in training, designing instruction, and addressing the concerns of teachers and volunteer instructors (Kutner et al., 1992; Sherman et al., 1991).

Developing Ownership in Training

There are several ways in which program administrators can create an environment for learning that enables adult education teachers and volunteer instructors to feel they are key players in their own professional development.

Conducting needs assessments. An essential component of effective staff development programs is a needs assessment that includes state and local directors, instructors, and learners. Assessment of staff development needs should rely heavily, although not exclusively, on the perceptions of teachers and volunteer instructors (Orlich, 1989).

Involving teachers and volunteer instructors in planning. Teachers and volunteer instructors benefit most from training activities that they have major responsibility for planning, implementing, and evaluating (Loucks-Horsley et al., 1987).

Creating a professional environment. Teachers need to be *rewarded* (with money, release time, advancement) for engaging in staff development, *recognized* for their achievements, and *respected* as professionals. They also need time and support to pursue new learning and to experiment in their classrooms (Jones & Lowe, 1982; Lieberman, 1988).

Actively involving teachers in their own learning. Self-directed learning, peer coaching, and teacher research actively involve teachers and volunteer instructors in their own training (Loucks-Horsley et al., 1987).

Designing Instruction

Effective staff development related to designing instruction includes the following :

Incorporation of theory and research into teaching. Effective staff development programs need to include theoretical background and, where possible, applied research findings regarding the new practices being fostered. Instructors need to know why an instructional change is being sought and what research evidence supports that change (Joyce & Showers, 1984;Tibbetts et al., 1991).

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Demonstration of practice. Demonstration or modeling of desired practices helps to reinforce the concepts being taught and to make concrete the application of theory to practice. Such demonstrations can be displayed through video, modeling by trainers, and peer coaching (Kutner et al., 1992).

Practice and feedback. Teaching strategies must be modeled and practiced many times before they are internalized. When learning new instructional techniques or procedures, participants should first be allowed to practice them in a safe environment in simulations and role plays, with opportunities for positive and constructive feedback.

Application. Practice in a simulated situation should be followed by supported application in a real one. Such practice is best provided by peer coaches who are themselves learning the new practice. Mentors or other support personnel are also effective, especially if they are not in a position to evaluate the instructor (Jones & Lowe, 1990).

Follow-up. Staff development programs should be spaced over time to afford teachers opportunities to adapt and modify practices to fit their teaching environments. One approach involves sequential training sessions, allowing instructors to try methods and materials between workshops and compare results.

Evaluation. Although it is important to determine what participants liked or did not like about a particular staff development approach, effective evaluation of training should be concerned more directly with changes that take place in instructional practices (Leahy, 1986).

Addressing Concerns of Teachers and Volunteers

Offering training that is easily accessible and sensitive to the needs of teachers and volunteers is essential. This can be accomplished by providing decentralized training and by using experienced and qualified staff to provide training. A decentralized training approach promotes local camaraderie by providing adult educators the opportunity to receive training with others who are in close proximity and with whom they can share ideas and materials (Leahy, 1986). It is important to use experienced and dedicated administrators and staff to provide training. Often, practitioners are used effectively as trainers because of their first-hand experience, sensitivity to instructors' needs, accessibility to trainees, and expertise in specific content areas (Kutner et al., 1992; Sherman et al., 1991).

Conclusion

The constraints of the adult education delivery system make teacher and volunteer instructor training a challenging task. Although a number of training formats have been used, not all are successful. Teachers may evaluate some formats positively, but lack the feedback, reinforcement, and support they need to apply what they have learned in their classrooms. The most successful teacher and volunteer training programs involve extensive, ongoing training that has a solid theoretical basis and that teachers help to plan, implement, and evaluate.

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